**LCC Children's Social Care and Covid-19 – What have we learned?**

*Lancashire County Council Children's Social Care Survey June 2020*

*"Working from home has proved to be unbelievably beneficial. It's reduced the amount of travel time, the amount of expenses claimed and ensured enough time in the week for me to actually keep up with my workload for the first time in years. It's proved beyond any doubt that we can adapt and work under our own local management effectively enough to deliver a service model of excellence. We need management to show trust in their teams that have shown as much progress and ability as ours has and reward this with more freedom to work from home and office as managed by individuals and their direct line management. Trust is key and as key workers we have proved ourselves consistently throughout this pandemic. Its senior management's time to show their trust in us and give us the freedom to shine."*

This has been a hugely valuable and fascinating survey, first off a massive thanks to the 635 of you who took time to share your thoughts. So, what have we learned from this? We hope you find this report interesting reading, and beyond the graphs and statistics we have picked out some responses that I hope capture what you have been saying.

The biggest thing we have learnt is that staff have largely valued working from home. The greater flexibility, balance to your lives, reduced travel, trust and positive support from your managers and team has been clearly appreciated. Lots of you report health benefits, reduced stress, and greater productivity, **however**, this is not the experience for everyone and working from home can feel isolating and more stressful too. Many of you are clearly missing that team support and there are groups/situations when working at home is particularly difficult, e.g. new starters, those with childcare challenges, or when you IT isn't working well.

Working in virtual ways clearly has lots of benefits, Skype meetings, virtual visits, direct work and supervision have often been positive. These have provided efficiencies, more focused work, improved engagement from partner agencies, and greater contact with some families, children and young people. However, again this is not universally positive, many of you are highly aware of the impact on the quality of relationships and what you miss from these being virtual. So some virtual working arrangements may be positive to keep doing in future, but other meetings may benefit from being physical meetings again.

This survey has given us lots of valuable feedback from you all and will inform how we develop our services and working practices in the coming months.

*Senior Leadership Team- Childrens Social Care*

**Q5 What changes should we keep?**

*"Being able to work from home and carry out as many meetings as possible by Skype. No longer having to travel long distances across Lancashire to an out of area meeting, which could get cancelled when I get there. Not having to worry about where to park and how to find somewhere in area I do not know. There is no longer any wastage of paper and I am truly working in a paperless fashion as all reports and documents are emailed to attendees of meetings before hand and there is no need to physically print a report for a meeting then throw all the copies away at the end."*

*"I think it is important to give all workers the same flexibility to work from home as well as flexibility in their hours "*

*"Meetings and courts doing things internet wise. Massive time and cost cutter"*

*"Virtual core groups have improved family participation in meetings"*

*"Not necessarily keep, but rather 'choice' around holding a meeting 'virtually'. Both CP conferences/CLA reviews alongside team meetings supervision etc."*

*"Flexibility with contact with children via video call in between direct visits. Flexibility of use of Skype for core groups/care planning where not all attendees can come. Use of Skype for some management calls/meetings/discussions. Greater flexibility with working from home."*

*"To think more creatively as to how we promote family time for our young people i.e. they may have set face to face time however obstacles such as Bank Holidays/ Christmas etc, when the centre is closed, it would be possible in most cases, for some form of family time to take place i.e. Zoom/WhatsApp video calls between children and parents, when we are unable to offer that service"*

**Q5 What changes should we get rid of?**

*"I have found very little disadvantages in the way we have worked through Covid-19."*

*"Working from home all the time, miss team atmosphere and support from the office."*

*"Some meeting via skype are not appropriate, difficult to respectfully challenge parents and professionals. Finding less input in virtual meeting from professional compared to face to face meetings."*

*"Too many skype calls-very draining."*

*"Those managers who do not recognise 'modern art of management' and who have some insecurities that staff are not able to work at home. The research by Audit Commission has also indicated how well and flexible the workforce has been to adapt to changes."*

*"Skype has not been affective particularly for our weekly meetings. They have been abandoned in most cases."*

*"Having to come in to the office 5 days a week when it is not necessary every day."*

*"By offering flexibility of some work being home based and some centre based would provide a more efficient service."*

*"Offices out in district being closed and inaccessible."*

*"Daily Skype Video calling feels invasive."*

*"I feel the corona tests are too frequent (2 weekly) and would be better to just be tested if have symptoms or been in contact with someone who has – maybe be tested at work then there is just one pick up for many staff."*

*"ICT systems with some of their rules and regulations"*

**Q7 What has worked well?**

*"Court hearings, skype meetings saving so much time, creative ways of working with young people."*

*"Skype calls, skype meetings, regular supervisions with workers, flexibility of home working from managers and acknowledgement of balancing this with family responsibilities."*

*"Less travelling to meetings, more contact with staff via skype, working from home which has reduced sickness and helped with staff wellbeing."*

*"Working from home and having a balance in family life – how we manage phone calls in has worked for me as it is less disruptive to the flow of assessments."*

*"Team meetings more often. Less time spent travelling to and from the office, this has given me a much better work/life balance."*

*"More productive as no time wasting on getting ready, driving to work and I find I finalise assessments in time and have more time to reflect on them too."*

*"I have developed technological skills."*

*"Video calls. Working with agencies – everyone is much more helpful. Could just be due to Covid or because people can concentrate better. Not being crammed in an office, no office politics, no distractions when trying to do you work, having a proper lunch break is amazing for my wellbeing."*

*"As a BSO, all I need is a laptop and connection to the server, all aspects of work can be done online, can manage duty as well as mailboxes; and stay in touch with the team via skype."*

*"IT are extremely helpful. We can email invoices to accounts payable instead of internal posting them."*

*"Strategy meetings – i.e. one took 20 minutes 15 people dialled in and it was done instead of all those people spending time to travel to the venue. People have Skyped in from other LAs in other parts of the country who would be unlikely to attend otherwise."*

*"More communication with the young people I work with."*

**Q9 What has not worked well?**

*"Not physically being based with colleagues means a lot of information is simply not shared as would be in "normal" circumstances throughout a working day."*

*"IT systems are a constant issue which has added to staff morale."*

*"Unable to access some families for face to face direct work. Face to face is key for assessing body language and also for general observations i.e. injuries when there is domestic abuse."*

*"Sensitive direct work, such as DV work, and children's attention span on a mobile video call."*

*"It has just felt disjointed, no team working and I feel management expect so much from workers who are still having to complete visits on the frontline without any regard to the stress and anxiety this is causing."*

*"Not having the correct seating equipment working too many hours not knowing when to switch off. Carrying the stress at home all day even after switching of. Lack of ability to compartmentalise and switch off. It becoming normal or an expectation to work catch up at the weekend. Having my daughter also working from home. Privacy in meetings. Household daily noises from family when on meetings. Lack of understanding on working hours from family. At times skype meeting and conferences can be difficult for families. People not turning up for skype calls technology difficulties LCS."*

*"SKYPE ICPC's and RCPC's not being able to seen parent's beforehand and during the Conference."*

*"Interagency working with police appears strained. We are no longer able to use our autonomy as individual social workers when seeking checks as police will not provide information unless managers oversight states this. It feels as though police have become less flexible and helpful. It would be better to have telephone access to police staff so we can still have discussions when needed like we use to."*

*"It has been challenging making calls to families who have had other siblings at home and have got too overwhelmed with all the information that has been given to them. Families have started to tail off and asked for fortnightly or in some cases monthly calls."*

*"Court hearings especially Initial are difficult and are really hard on parents who do not understand the process and are un-sure who is speaking."*

**We have included quite a number of comments from this last question, both to capture the breadth of what staff were saying and show that senior managers are listening to staff who have clearly wanted to use this opportunity to share important messages with them.**

**Q10 Anything else you would want management to know or hear?**

*"Firstly, I want to thank management for being so understanding and flexible with everything in the beginning. I hope this situation has shown how well we can do our jobs whilst at home. It would be a huge weight off my shoulders if one day I could be given the choice to work from home instead of taking special leave when my child is suddenly sick as I have no family members to be there for him when this happens. I hate having to unexpectedly take this leave and put my workload onto the rest of the team when I could easily take the work back with me and do it remotely. It could also be very useful during the long summer holidays where parents don't have anywhere near enough leave to be able to look after their children."*

*"This has been a particularly difficult time and I have seen the impact it has had in particular on myself and colleagues' emotional wellbeing and ability to be able to concentrate on the work we do on a 'normal' day to day basis. For your home to become your permanent place of work, it is draining. Going out to work gives you a sense of drive and purpose that working from home on a full time basis takes away. On the whole I feel that my team and the support network there is imperative to me being able to do a good job and having an office base allows this to happen. The flip side to this is that it has slowed me down, I don't have to be out of the door at a specific time, to be at work on time and it gives me a little extra mind space in the morning that does not involve rush hour traffic."*

*"Just regarding an up-date on accessing the £26.00 monthly benefit for all staff (working from home which is paid by your employer) and how to go about this process. It would go towards the cost of heating and lighting and broadband and would be a good gesture by LCC to help staff financially in these unprecedented times."*

*"I believe remote working in this way is not safe. It is not safe for children, nor workers. I believe it is only a matter of time until something serious is missed due to the difficulties in sharing information/communication working in isolation and with the inability to make shared decisions in urgent times of crisis. Newer, less resilient and experienced workers ability to learn, be taught and support is significantly compromised and I would have significant concerns for their quality of practice should this continue for the longer term if only by virtue of the new ways of working. My fear is that the Service will end up with a 'generation' of ASYE's/New Staff who, through no fault of their own, are not working to the safe and high standards which we know LCC can produce. Staff have welcomed the increase in flexibility and I feel this should continue regardless. There needs to be further and comprehensive support/training packages to counter any changes to working and to enhance the potentials."*

*"I am very impressed with the council as they have been supportive with us working from home, our ICT kit and set up have made us to be able to continue to serve the communities that we support without any difficulties at all (apart from the odd issue with LCS and EHM) My work life balance is so much better, I may log on earlier and work a little later but then I can sit in my garden for my lunch break. Sickness levels have greatly improved and in my team I have had no sicknesses since the beginning of March. I do miss my colleagues and chat time around the photocopier and doing the brew run but I pick up the phone and still say hello when I can, Lancashire we can be proud of ourselves we are doing a great job :)"*

*"Offices need to be improved. Some offices lack a conducive and healthy environment prior to the outbreak and impacted wellbeing and levels of motivation. We want a healthy environment in which to work. Time for a fresh approach on returning to what will be the 'new normal'. If it wasn't working before it isn't going to work on return. Look at the whole system not just the workers, time for a fresh approach. Lancashire has moved mountains to get some of these changes through and it was commendable. Please be brave and innovative, include staff and implement a more bottom up approach to help develop certain aspects of services. Provide feedback on staff suggestions."*

*"Although social workers have their own individual cases, all aspects of the role is working within in a team as covid-19 has prevented all the person centred elements for the child, family, the multi-agency team and the team the social worker sits within. We are not able to learn and develop when we are separated from our colleagues. Social work is not a job that can be done in isolation."*

*"There are definite real positives which can be utilised post COVID in terms of SW use of time and focused work on families who really need it. Remote working has its advantages as does use of electronic devices for some communication with families and for meetings – however this is not sustainable and face to face meetings/visits need to be used in conjunction. For managers, I myself have found supervision difficult, case discussions do not always appears as effective and the importance of what is discussed had been lost - the use of body language an facial expressions in this has an impact of judging cases and severity of concerns risks etc. thank you."*

*"The buildings should be re-opened. Even if staff could possibly go into the buildings on a rota basis in bubbles, this would resume some normality. Some staff do not have the luxury of a separate office in their home and therefore is often hard to switch off in their living room or at their dining table with their children around."*

*"Concerns about returning to the office and the close proximity of how our desks are set out, with no screens in place to help protect."*

*"The way in which we have worked needs to be assessed thoroughly with a very careful analysis to ensure the impact of lockdown on personal lives do not negatively impact the assessment of staff's ability to work from home; they are very different issues. Additionally the ability to WFH vs the liking of it should be clearly defined and separated. The ability to work from home should be retained with a change of senior management culture which seems to 'require' staff to be based in an office. Staff management should be based on output than 'attendance' at work to support this move; which is a shift that should be made in any case. More training for those who struggle to undertake their role from home/other bases should be promoted as it is clear many staff have insufficient know-how in terms of IT. This is covered off in an office environment by those individuals utilising other staff to solve their issues but does not result in ownership of their own learning to achieve a basic understanding of IT set up and query resolution. Also, all staff should be undertaking at least basic Office courses as provided by L&D to improve knowledge, efficiency and confidence. Since the lockdown I have been thoroughly impressed with the way my team have adjusted (almost seamlessly) to this way of working. The outputs of the team as a whole has, at a minimum, remained the same if not increased and with the acknowledgement that some face-to-face time is required/preferred the overwhelming outcome is a permanent shift to this way of working. CFW can deliver a significant percentage of their support work remotely (from the family) and this should be continued; increasing efficiency, reducing travel costs, reducing building costs, increasing time to actually support families (potentially allowing increased caseloads)."*

*"How well we have worked together as team and even having a better working relationship with external partners. Having our laptops and equipment all set up to do the job we do at home and IT service working well to keep the system up and running. Just shows this crisis happened we were ready to continue are work but also adapt and change things quickly to meet the work we have needed to do. I'm proud to work for Lancashire Council."*

*"Being forced to work from home and carry out my duties remotely has proved that my role can be done remotely and that previous decisions to move my post should be rethought. Flexible working should be the norm not the exception. Having a young family to think about, having the ability to work my hours around then rather than have set hours in an office has enabled a better work life balance. I feel I am more productive when this balance is improved."*

*"My work life balance feels good, I feel less stressed due to no commuting. The environment will benefit from more people working from home. It would be good to have a balance of working from home and going into an office if needed as there is still a need for some face to face interaction."*

*"WFH is not for everyone and just because a manger who has an office at home likes it should not make it compulsory. I don't have a spare room so laptop on dining table a constant pressure to work. I have struggled with loneliness uncertain in my abilities without team around me. I have found WFH so stressful and do not want to work this way moving forward."*

*"I think that it is unfair that staff are unable to claim mileage from their home address, I also think that it is unfair that we are not being reimbursed for the cost of working from home when this is the direction being given rather than a choice of the employee."*

*"Children at home and the task of carrying on working is very challenging. School expect the children to complete work set this has been impossible due to my employment and tasks needed to complete I feel busier than ever."*

*"Although there have been many perks to the current situation I would like to see 2/3 office days back as when out on visits we need a base, considering we may be travelling in from other towns/cities. Also it has highlighted for me the value of face to face contact with my teams and managers and this is somethings a skype call cannot replace. Home working for part of my week would be a great move forward as I have found it flexible and productive to my performance. I feel skype training particularly is much better and time / money saving, but there is an element of discussions that is lost."*

*"Many staff have stated that they have felt more stressed WFH as they feel they have worked longer hours to compensate being at home, they have also said that their homes have been invaded so to speak by LCC, as it is their home not an LCC office. They have missed the support of each other and being given the option to be able to attend their usual work space as a touch down opportunity away from the constraints of family life. It has felt like we have left our vulnerable families to fend for themselves at a distance. The consensus from my supervisions is that staff would like some autonomy on making the right safety choices for themselves as adults and professionals. In addition the PPE could have been more plentiful and better coordinated in the beginning. I have enjoyed WFH but am ready for some relaxation of being able to go back into an office a couple of times a week even if just for a few hours. SKYPE has its uses but is not the same interactions, the IT system has regularly let staff down creating additional anxiety amongst them."*

*"The restrictions have required everyone to be more imaginative and flexible."*

*"The use of online platforms for engaging with young people has been particularly successful and should be built into our practice going forward."*

*"I think the situation has been managed really well."*

*"Thanks for continuing to ensure that we have been supported and listened to, as staff, throughout despite some of the uncertainties. There have been difficulties but the overwhelming majority have been overcome by listening to staff and that is really appreciated as it has been an understandably difficult time for everyone."*

**Conclusion**

It is evident that there is a real mix of opinions on how staff would like us to move forward when planning our next steps. As a senior management team we will now take all the information and consider how to support you. There has been some excellent suggestions and it is very clear that lots of people have adapted and embraced working at home and for others this has not been as positive and productive. Staff have requested we discuss plans for the future and the way we use buildings, this is important to us and we will be creating a short task and finish group to consider how we move to a way of working that is safe and also considers the needs of all staff.

Thank you for undertaking the work it will make a difference to how we take the next steps



**Sharon Hubber**

**Director of Children's Social Care**